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My thesis work is a culmination of the experiences I've had and how they have shaped the person and artist I am. My work acts as short stories about major impacts on my life such as, my grandfather's death, growing up in the Mississippi River valley, recognition of God, moments of intense intimacy, and memorable encounters in nature. My work deals with memory, personal experience, and the conflict between the real and the artificial. While all the works are based on my own personal experiences, the viewer has their own separate interpretation, an experience of curiosity and confrontation.

HAUNTED BY WATERS

by

Codey Gallas

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APPROVAL PAGE

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PREFACE

It was a normal sunny day on the water with my dad, uncle and grandfather. I was barely tall enough to see over the edge of the boat. From this very young age, I always wanted to tag along—even if I couldn't fish as long as they could. They would fish all day in the hot sun, and I would too, until I got too tired to stand.

I'll always remember the moments before falling asleep on the floor of my grandfather's boat. The carpet was comfortable—bright orange shag from the 1970s—similar to the carpet in their house. An umbrella was placed above me to block out the rays from the warm sun. I could smell fish, the slime on the lures and the breeze from the river. As I settled in, the waves rocked the boat back and forth and I fell asleep.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. BOYHOOD.....	1
II. FIRE AND WOOD.....	2
III. GESTURES	5
IV. SPIRITUAL PRESENCE	9
V. THE ARTIFICIAL AND THE REAL.....	11
VI. CONCLUSION.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	18
CATALOGUE OF IMAGES.....	19

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD

“When I was a boy...I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I’ve been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures.” This quote by John Muir describes my boyhood fascination with places that were always accessible to me. Growing up in southeastern Minnesota, there was no shortage of seemingly wild places. I was only a short bike ride from many rivers and lakes that were my hometown’s pride and joy. I grew up driving to many lakes and rivers to fish and hunt; those places are invaluable to me and have shaped who I’ve become. Ever since I can remember, I have always felt more at home and alive when I’m engaging with nature. I can carve a niche for myself anywhere outside. This independent resourcefulness and curiosity influences my drive to be an artist and fuels my artistic practice.

In my first year within the MFA program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, I knew that the natural world was going to be permanently embedded within my work; however, one question that I’ve been wrangling throughout graduate school is: What about the natural world was important to me? Many of my initial sketches, projects, trials, and errors were in pursuit of an answer that I still continue to mine.

CHAPTER II

FIRE AND WOOD

When I came to this program, I thought I was a ceramicist; however, as my artistic practice began to take root and grow, I began my departure away from clay. I was attracted to clay because it's literally earth. From this jumping off point, I began to investigate other natural medias such as smoke and soot.

I began to make drawings by burning a sap-ridden piece of wood, called "fat wood." As this wood smoldered and burned, a smoke signal grew out of it. I captured this smoke by holding a piece of paper above it. Eventually, I learned how to manipulate this by rotating and moving the paper above the smoke. This process soon became prescriptive and I became unsatisfied with the limited, predictable marks I was able to achieve.

As I began to think about how to push this idea further, I thought about how I use fire. I use fire to keep warm and cook food while camping. It's elemental, primal, and sometimes it's a solo activity, much like my initial soot drawings were—I made them by myself; however, fire is also communal—it brings people together.

During my childhood, every Christmas Eve, my family and I attended the midnight Christmas service at church. I don't remember the service, but I'll always remember fire; everyone held lit candles. I've always been attracted to this idea of holding fire. Then it clicked. Beyond my own two hands, I realized what the work needed

was more hands holding more fires. This seemingly simple shift had a major impact on my work.

For the communal drawing, a class of drawing students sat in a tight circle, knee to knee; each held their own piece of burning wood, just like a candle. As they held their candles, I moved the sheet of paper above them and captured the smoke. Each mark represented a direct correlation of that specific space, the circle, and each person present. At the time I was excited to create a “drawing” without being the mark-maker; instead, I was the initiator, or director (Figure 1). What I didn’t realize is that I had created a communal experience for the students who participated. This notion of recreating a distilled version of my own past experiences and sharing it with others is an important theme that my work carries.

While I continued to pursue making smoke drawings, I began to seek out other natural materials that I use in my life. Instead of purchasing lumber to make a sculpture, I decided to cut down my own wood near where I live.

The piece, *Wood Wall #1* (Figure 2), consists of a stack of large logs, each cut in half. These slices are stacked on top of each other to form a vertical wall or barrier. On one side of the wall, the bark texture is present; on the other side, it’s the flat faces of each cut log. Woven throughout this flat side of the wall is a string of EL wire lights, which resemble small neon lights. The strand of light outlines defining characteristics found within the surface of the wood. From a distance, in a darkened space, all one would see are the brightly colored lines in space; as one gets closer, they can see the natural details within the wood that the lights are outlining. Although this piece juxtaposes two

completely different materials, wood and lights, this clash allowed me to realize the importance of light and how it can be used to alter or even emphasize a certain space. This piece also helped me to branch out beyond solely natural materials. By adding the synthetic lights, I was faced with another ongoing question: What does it mean to combine the natural with the artificial?

CHAPTER III

GESTURES

Eventually, I began to feel frustrated and limited by bringing nature into my studio and making, sometimes forcing, it into art. For example, in the piece, *Stone Mountain*, I built a 4' x 5' clay mound that resembled a mountain. I wanted to revisit clay and push it as a material by adding a layer of video on top; however, this piece was unsuccessful. The two materials didn't seem to marry each other and it ended up looking like a diorama or volcano science project. Scale was an issue. How can I capture the bigness of landscape? How can I capture the feeling of being confronted by the vastness of being within that bigness?

Artist Richard Long investigates similar questions within his walking pieces. In "A Line Made by Walking," he confronts the large scale of the landscape by using his own body to move through the environment. As he repeatedly walked the same line over and over, a path was formed, leaving his presence or mark upon the earth.

I wanted to share my experiences with others in an artful, thoughtful way, but the only thing I wanted to do was to be outside, beyond the white walls of my messy studio. I needed fresh air; I needed space to be. This desire to be outside resulted in the video, *Ten Gallons* (Figure 3). I frequent Stone Mountain State Park, NC often and decided to create a drawing within this specific landscape.

I collected ten gallons of water from a trout stream at the base of the mountain and carried all ten gallons as I hiked to the summit. Once there, I found the spot where the water had initially began its journey down the mountain and into the stream below. I deciphered this as it left behind “dry run marks” on the face of the mountain. Here, I lined up the gallons of water and strategically poured the water out on top of the hot, stone surface. I physically completed a cycle by transporting the water back where it started, at the top. This gesture of releasing the water became a temporary mark made on the earth; I was making a drawing.

This was the first time I had ever used video as an art form, as a means to capture my experience. I see this specific video as more narrative than all of my previous work; I put myself into the landscape and completed a series of temporary actions. It wasn’t a drawing on paper made in my studio—it was a temporary drawing made in a specific place to which I am very connected. I wanted to capture my presence, however small, within the landscape. This type of work was and is really exciting to me.

As I continued to think about how other personal experiences and actions could become drawings, I made the *Bike Drawing* (Figure 4). I often bike to school and consider my bicycle as a tool to which I am very connected. My route is always the same—it’s repetitive, but also meditative. As I biked through puddles, I became fascinated with the marks the tires left behind. I then decided to turn my bicycle into a painting machine.

I spent several hours in a hardware store piecing together bits and pieces of PVC pipe and levers to create specific paint canisters that sit above each bike tire. I then bound

together elk hair (similar to how I tie flies for fly fishing) to create a brush that would paint the tires as paint slowly seeped down from the canisters. Once the painting machine was ready, I biked on a 24' x 15' raw canvas. I biked slowly, in order to keep my balance; I biked in circles, and switched to figure eights when I became dizzy. As I continued to bike, the marks left behind built up so much that it was difficult to discern which marks came first; this was the first time I had played with space in this way. After the performance, the giant canvas was hung on the wall like a painting—the horizontal drawing space became a vertical viewing space, very much like a Jackson Pollock action painting; however, my canvas was so large, it draped across the floor, spilling back into the horizontal space.

Another tool that is dependent on movement, gestures, and actions, to which I am very connected to, is my fishing pole. I'm also very connected to the landscape of where I grew up—the Mississippi River. I knew I wanted to make a piece that used the action of casting, reeling, and “setting the hook,” but didn't quite know how to capture that experience—how can a normal fishing outing transform into something called fine art?

I decided to make a drawing, similar to both the *Bike Drawing* and the video, *Ten Gallons*—but different in that I used a different tool (a fishing pole), and a specific location. The first 100 miles of the Mississippi River are backwater areas where the water moves slowly; this is where my father and I always fished. These areas of slow current are perfect for water plant life to grow and accumulate—often times covering the entire surface of the water. The plant Duckweed, is native to this area of the river and grows in abundance—the entire surface of the water is coated green. Wherever there is Duckweed,

there's bound to be lots of fish because these plants release a lot of oxygen into the water and also provide shade and cover for fish from predators and the sun. Typically, fishermen drag lures across this green surface, leaving an open trail behind; as the Duckweed separates, fish assume this movement is a bug, frog, or mouse for consumption. This trail or mark however, is only temporary, as the Duckweed soon flows back into place, closing the gap. Ever since I was a child, I have always been fascinated by the marks that the lures and fishing lines left behind—the fisherman were creating ephemeral drawings—they were leaving their mark on the world. In this specific piece, *Duckweed Drawing* (Figure 5), I used video to capture my journey—putting the boat in the water, using my fishing pole as a drawing utensil to make my marks on the surface of the water, and returning back to the mainland. This new way of documenting and capturing drawing within the environment led me to think about temporality—how can temporality be a thread within my practice, and how do I capture it?

CHAPTER IV

SPIRITUAL PRESENCE

During our class trip to Mexico City and Santa Fe area including Taos Pueblo, I was most preoccupied with designated sacred spaces—churches and burial grounds, as well as ancient dwellings, and even the landscape, which hold centuries of its people’s history embedded within it. One church in Santa Fe in particular was nestled beneath a mountain and beautiful lake—in this instance, both the church and the landscape were places of worship. This combination of nature and religion is something that I have been continually thinking about a lot.

When I was little, my family only went to church on Christmas; my interpretation of my own religion is narrow. I know religion is something you’re supposed to feel deeply connected to; however, in church, the only things I enjoyed were holding candles and singing with others—intimacy, light, and togetherness.

When I returned from the class trip, I knew I wanted to create a piece that dealt with spirituality and also, my grandfather who had passed away the year before. My grandfather was a fisherman; despite our different fishing styles (he was much more analytical and kept charts and data logs of every fishing trip), fishing was always our favorite topic of conversation. He had been sick for a long time before his death, but even so, when it happened, it still shocked me and it was hard for me to accept that he was gone. All of our fishing memories resurfaced. As time passed, my grandmother cleaned

out his things and gifted me a box full of his old lures and tackle—I knew in this moment that I had to make a piece about my grandfather. As I began to accept his death, and the fact settled within me, I still felt sad. I felt like that old saying: I was “stuck between a rock and a hard place.” This saying was the premise for the sculpture I made in memory of my grandfather, Harry, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Figure 6). The sculpture explores balance and tension; the wooden base teeters slightly as the rod holds the line taught, and the lure is caught on the rock. Through these materials, I dealt with the tension I still feel—there’s a piece still missing, but I’ll forever hold onto our experiences shared together. This was a very personal piece for me to make, and I began to wonder, how can the personal relationships in my life be a point of departure for future sculptures?

CHAPTER V

THE ARTIFICIAL AND THE REAL

I soon realized that all of my sportsman hobbies combine the natural world and the artificial: I use duck calls that imitate the sound of real ducks, I use and make lures made of both natural materials like wood and feathers, but they also contain synthetic rubber and plastic. There's a strange and beautiful obsession that I think many sportsman have about imitating and handcrafting things that belong in nature; as a maker, I'm even more inclined.

The wall installation, *Minnesota City to Winona* (Figure 7), was made out of homesickness. I wanted to be in the places where I felt most at home—places where my soul could rejuvenate. My home and memories of home are very much a part of who I am and this topic has resurfaced often in conversations with both faculty and my peers.

This piece is a memory map of specific places where I always fished on the Mississippi River. Mapping is something that nearly every outdoorsman does—it's a tool, but to me, it's also a drawing. Some of the marks on the map signify fishing holes, while others are landmarks to navigate my way back. Each point on the wall is marked by a hand-tied fly that I would use in that particular spot. These flies are specific to this river and are intended to capture large predatory fish like bass, muskies, and northern pike. In this part of the river, Minnesota City to Winona, the water is very wide and doesn't really look river-like at all; it's very easy to get lost. My father says that he knows the river so

well that he could navigate it while blindfolded. While that would never happen, I never doubted his knowledge of the river. This knowledge that he held was something I knew I wanted too. I wanted to know where every sandbar was, which underground stumps to avoid, and which channels to take to get to that secret spot that not many people know about.

By creating this personal map of lines and lures, I was connecting memories that were associated with places I went with my father on the river. At first glance, the map appears to resemble a constellation—which I find is only fitting because stars are also navigational tools to find your way home.

To delve deeper into understanding what it means to be connected to the natural world, I began to read writings by naturalists like Aldo Leopold, John Muir and Norman Maclean. I have always constantly thought about the bigness of nature; however, there are smaller, more intimate moments too that seem just as important as the big ones. In the piece, *Intimacy* (Figure 8), I focused on a small, delicate, particular happening—an intimate experience.

I thought about the lifespan of a hand-tied fly—sometimes they catch fish, and other times they get permanently stuck on branches, rocks, and in bushes—lost in the wilderness. These lost flies are tiny in comparison to their surroundings, yet they hang on and experience harsh winds and weather. I liked this idea of zooming in on this type of anticlimactic yet particular, subtle and poignant moment. In this piece, the line is taught between a rock made of clay and the fly, which is stuck on a small pine tree branch. This specific type of branch is considered new growth and is called the “candle.” This play on

the word “candle,” made me think back to holding a candle at Christmastime—a quiet, personal, illuminating moment. Right next to the rock and the pine branch, sits an audio speaker. I had pre-recorded the sound of wind from a location where I fish; the vibration from the speaker moved through the branch/candle causing the branch to move as if actual wind was blowing on it. This faux-breeze was a very exciting moment for me. I was able to combine both natural elements and artificial elements in a successful, distilled way. I elevated tiny moment—a gem.

After this piece, I knew I needed to read more nature writings and extract prompts from their words. At this point, I wanted to broaden my perspective by researching other naturalists, outdoor-enthusiasts, and their interpretation of the landscape. The readings that stuck with me the most were, *The Sand County Almanac* (Leopold), *A River Runs Through It* (Maclean), and *Thoughts on John Muir* (Muir). The more I read, I was swept up by their romanticized notion of the landscape of their time and related it to my own relationship with the landscape of my time. From this mini-collection, I began to use their words in combination with own memories and experiences.

One quote that I used was found in the book, *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean: “at sunrise everything is luminous, but not yet clear.” To me, this quote is about light or illumination, and a spiritual presence. To put this quote in context, it is said by Norman’s father as he describes a story about the river which ran along their church property; the story goes that a long time ago, rain landed on mud and over many years, that mud turned into the rocks and within those rocks is the word of God—and if you listened long enough, maybe the river would tell you the words (Maclean). This

reverberated with me and how I grew up; church wasn't a place, but an experience. It reminded me of my dad and his view on religion—he finds God in the places he goes and things he does. As a young child wondering about higher powers, I'd ask him about God and church. I never got simple answers. What I know about religion, I learned on the Mississippi River at sunrise from my father. "If you want to see God, just look around, the sunrise over the river, ducks in the sky, the fish in the river, the trees on the bluffs...he created all of this and we get to experience it. This is church."

In the diptych piece, *At Sunrise Everything is Luminous, But Not Yet Clear* (Figure 9), an artificial sunrise is created through the use of synthetic lights hidden within pine boxes. The glass has been frosted to create a haze that the viewer cannot see clearly through. Behind the glass in one of the boxes is an arrangement of hand-tied flies; these flies imitate small fish by using synthetic materials. In the other light box, are the remnants and off-cuts of feathers and fur from creating the flies. Even though any avid fisherman could discern what my materials are, sometimes the viewer cannot—and this leaves room for interpretation and contemplation.

Although I find inspiration from reading writings on nature, I am also still very much attached to my own endeavors and adventures within the landscape. In the wall piece, *Muskie Spring Outing* (Figure 10), a small wooden shelf holds a pile of white powder (lithium carbonate). Above the shelf is a blue piece of plastic that a red heat lamp shines through, casting a blue shadow on the wall and the shelf of powder. In this piece, I distilled the elements that greatly affected a recent fishing trip I took to the French Broad River, NC. During this trip, it snowed in the mountains where I camped and I had trouble

keeping warm. The white powder and the blue light represents coldness, while the red light of the heat lamp represents the heat of a fire. I wanted to create a piece in which the viewer could actually begin to physically feel warmth. Although this piece references natural elements such as temperature and snow, it is very much a synthetic replication of my experience—coming back to the theme of exploring the artificial and the real. The physical feelings within this piece are also greatly connected to the spiritual sensations mentioned earlier. Spiritual presence is real, it's physical, it's tangible, and to me, it exists within the landscape; like Norman Maclean's father said, "if you listen closely, maybe you'll hear the words of God." All of our senses cause us to have very real physical reactions and experiences; these physical confrontations brush us up against something outside of ourselves, something bigger.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Throughout my two years in graduate school, my work has evolved in ways I never knew it could. Mostly, I explored the endless possibilities of what drawing can encompass—from using my bicycle as a mark-maker, to casting lines through duckweed on the river. Although I explored many different types of materials (primarily rooted from my daily life such as: fishing lures, feathers, fur, and wood), all of my work is connected through several threads of investigation: How can I make something using my own body and sportsman-like actions (such as casting, rowing, reeling, and climbing, etc.), within the landscape? How can I leave my mark—even if only temporary—on the world? How can I distill or elevate the tiny moments and encounters rooted in the natural world that make me feel alive—and how do I begin to translate and share these gems?

These questions are constantly with me, entangled within my artistic practice and daily life. In searching for the answers, I realize it's sometimes difficult to find them; however, I know now that the answers are within me as I interact with the world, the landscape, and other people. The answers exist through experiences and actions, sometimes fleeting and temporary. The answers also exist encapsulated in sculptures and materials I've manipulated with my hands.

As I follow my own curiosity in the wonderment of the natural world, I'll continue to ruminate on the little moments that change my perspective—from snow

landing on my tent, to starting a fire, to contemplating death and the people who matter most to me, and the constant retelling of experiences and stories embedded within me.

I have always felt an extremely powerful connection when I'm surrounded by nature and the landscape; it's very difficult for me to describe, but when I'm out there, away from signs of civilization, I can feel the greatness and presence of something bigger. I fully believe in it and it rattles my bones. In reading *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean's words have been imprinted on my entire being, for I too, am "haunted by waters (Maclean)."

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CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *Smoke Drawing*, soot on paper, 20" x 20", 2015.

Figure 2. *Wood Wall #1*, wood, nails, LED lights, 12' x 8' x 3', 2015.

Figure 3. *Ten Gallons*, video, 5:51, 2016.

Figure 4. *Bike Drawing*, tempera paint on raw canvas, PVC pipe, elk hair, 15' x 24', 2016.

Figure 5. *Duckweed Drawing*, video, 6:18, 2016.

Figure 6. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, rock, Grandfather's lure, fishing line, wood, rag, fishing pole, 10' x 8' x 1', 2016.

Figure 7. *Minnesota City to Winona*, hand tied flies and lures, feathers, fur, string, pins, fishing line, 15' x 5', 2016.

Figure 8. *Intimacy*, pine tree branch (known as a 'candle'), clay, wood, hand tied fly, fishing line, audio speaker, 18" x 10" x 10", 2016.

Figure 9. *At Sunrise Everything is Luminous, But Not Yet Clear*, pine boxes, frosted glass, feathers, fur, flies, fishing line, light, 45" x 25", 2017.

Figure 10. *Muskie Spring Outing*, wooden shelf, lithium carbonate, heat lamp, blue plastic, 16" x 6', 2017.



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Figure 3. *Ten Gallons*, video, 5:51, 2016.

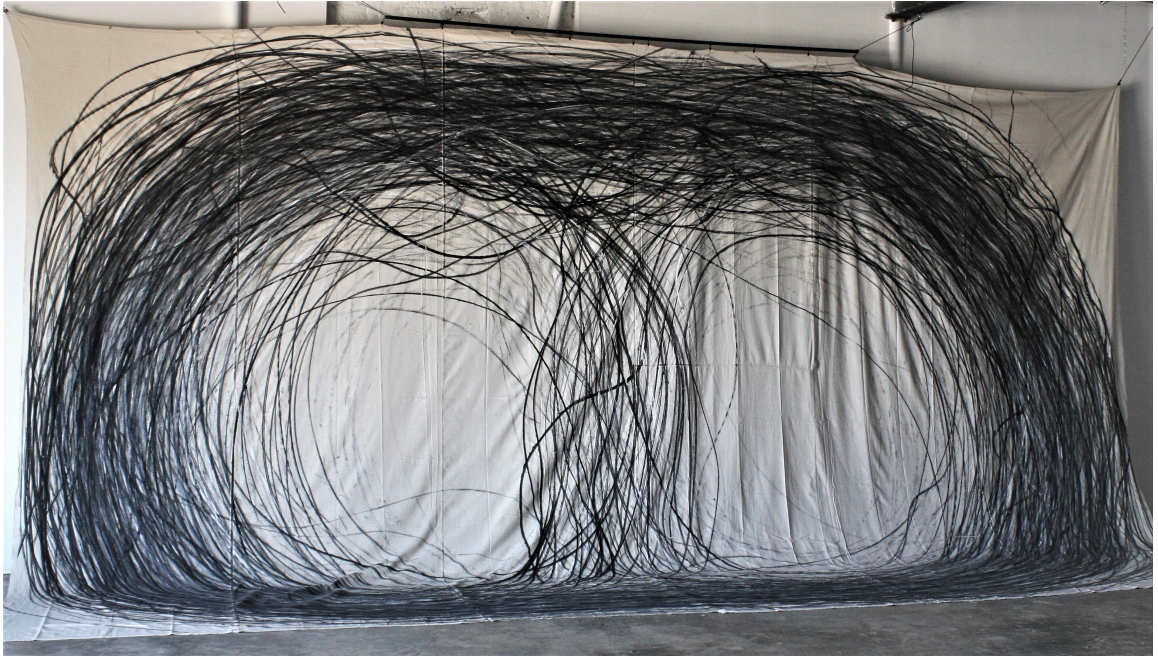


Figure 4. *Bike Drawing*, tempera paint on raw canvas, PVC pipe, elk hair, 15' x 24',
2016.

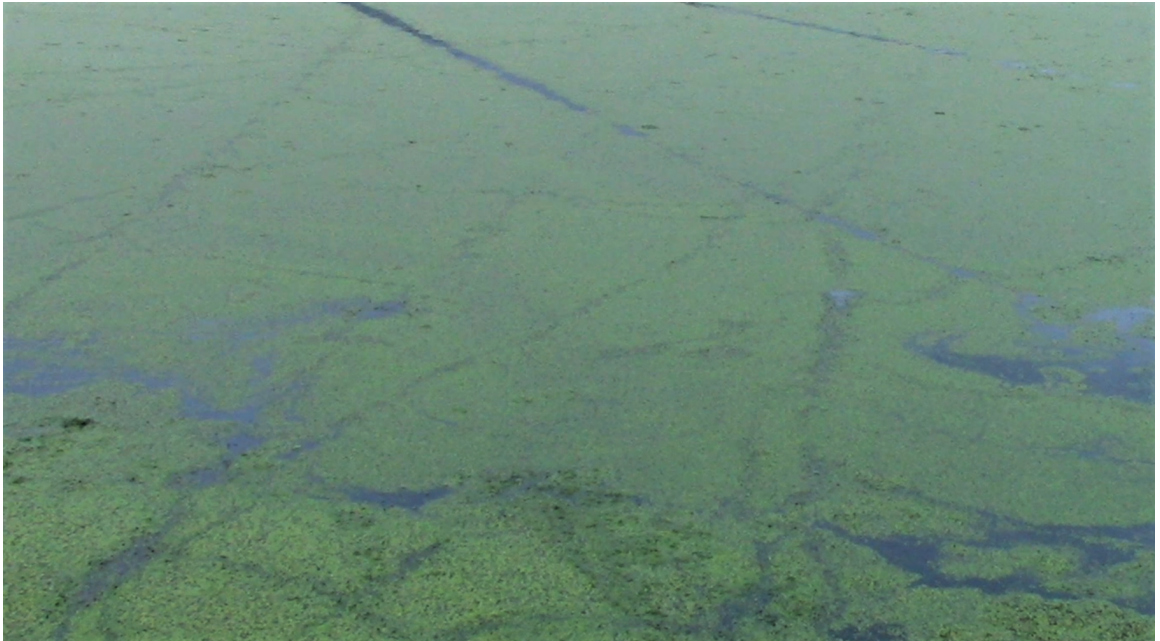


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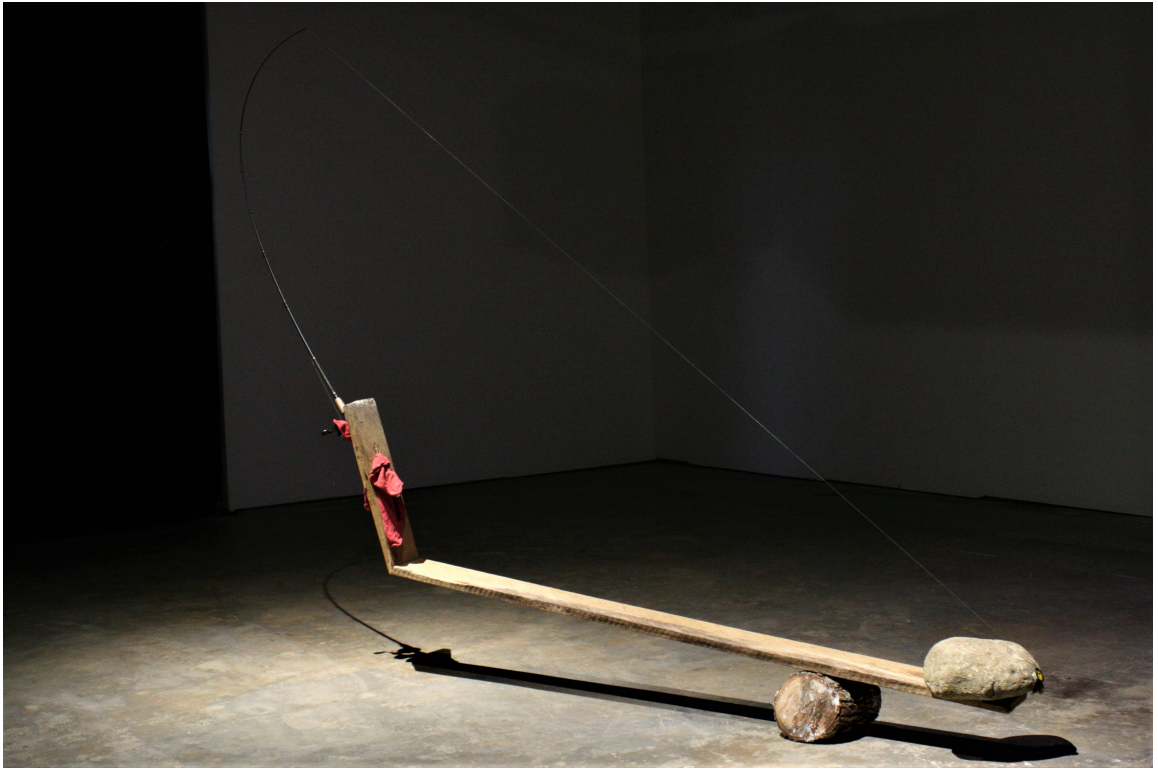


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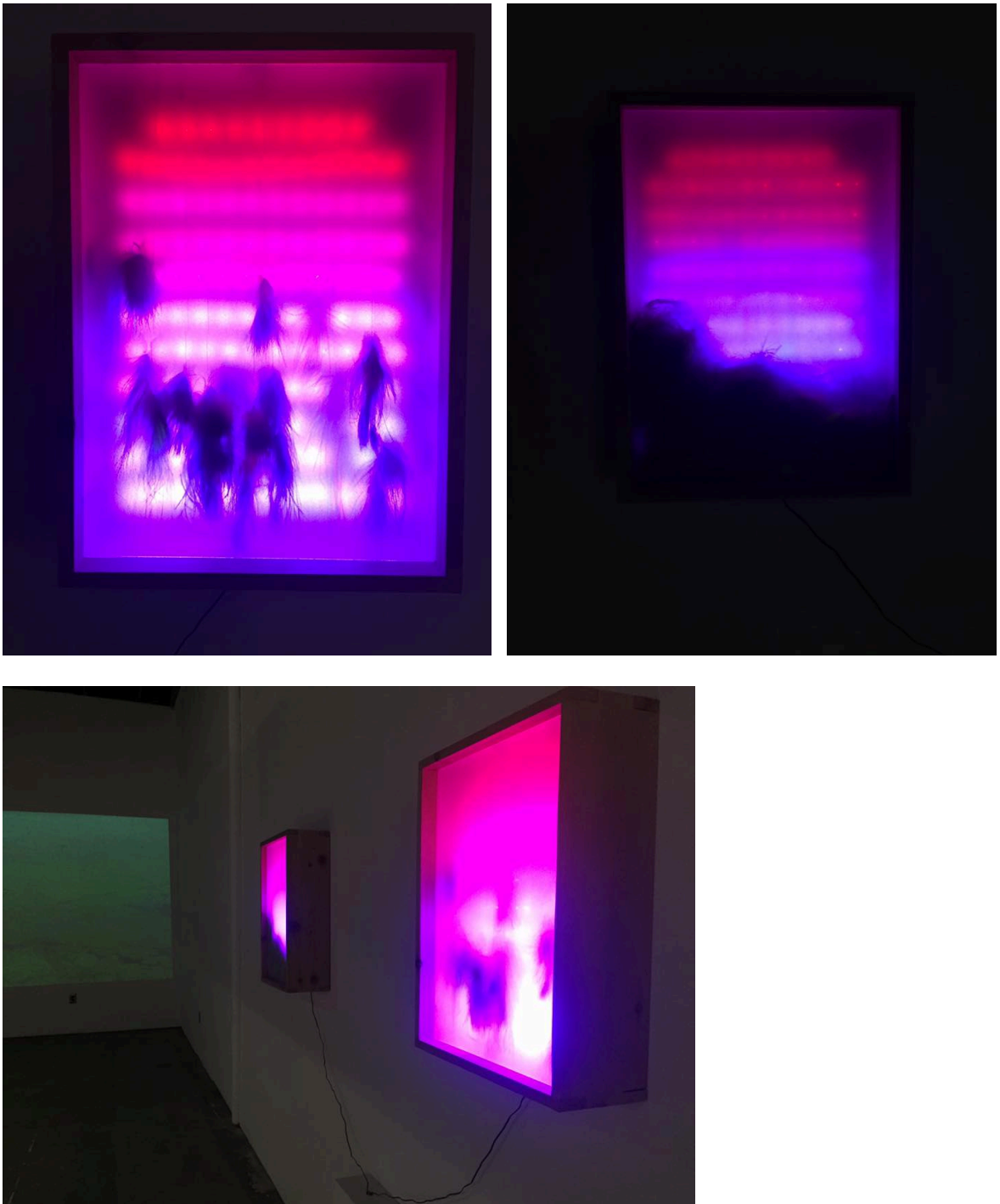


Figure 9. *At Sunrise Everything is Luminous, But Not Yet Clear*, pine boxes, frosted glass, feathers, fur, flies, fishing line, light, 45" x 25", 2017.

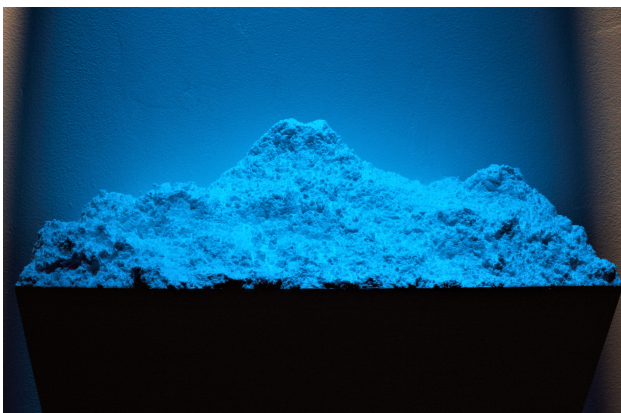
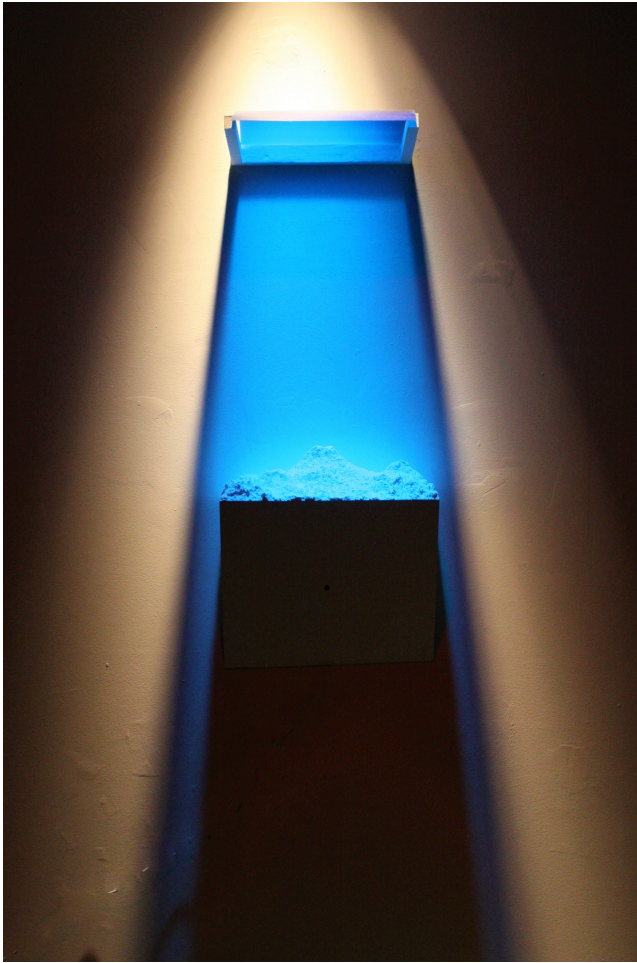


Figure 10. *Muskie Spring Outing*, wooden shelf, lithium carbonate, heat lamp, blue plastic, 16" x 6', 2017.